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ASSESSMENT OF KPNLF MILITARY FORCESIntroduction

The military forces of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) remain a small and fragile resistance movement. Information on the KPNLF is limited and not always reliable, but we do believe the KPNLF has made some improvements in its capabilities during the past 21 months by forming a unified command, establishing a slightly more dependable support base, and completing military training courses. Nevertheless, the KPNLF military will have to improve dramatically before it can seriously challenge units of the Vietnamese army in Kampuchea or even those of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK). Whether the Vietnamese or DK will permit the KPNLF to carry out attempts to build its military into a more viable resistance force is also problematical.

Troop Strength and Quality

KPNLF headquarters is located in northwestern Battambang Province close to the Thai border village of Ban Sa Ngae. In addition, there are three subordinate regional headquarters. KPNLF troops number 7-9,000 armed soldiers plus several thousand additional unarmed military personnel, totalling in all 10-12,000 people. They include former Lon Nol soldiers, deserters from both Heng Samrin and Democratic Kampuchea (DK) forces, and Khmer nationalists from the interior and abroad. In 1980 and 1981, China provided arms and ammunition for several thousand soldiers. The remainder of the KPNLF arms probably consists of weapons left over from the Lon Nol era, provided by the Thai, or brought by soldiers defecting from the DK or PRK military.

Military and other supplies remain a major problem, mainly because of KPNLF dependence for most supplies on external support, which is irregular, unreliable and often dependent on fragile arrangements. Limited quantities of food reportedly are obtained from KPNLF production areas and sympathizers in the interior.

KPNLF forces have a primitive communications network to maintain contact among military units. The KPNLF reportedly also possesses a commercial band radio transmitter, which could be used to increase the morale of its followers and troops, if it were allowed to commence broadcasting.

The KPNLF began training programs for military and civilians in 1979. The programs have gradually expanded to cover most levels of the military, appear to have resulted in some improvement in discipline, and over time should result in improvement in KPNLF

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fighting capability. A military school opened in January 1981 at Ban Sa Ngae with an enrollment of 177 cadets for training to command at the company level. The second class now in training totals 500 students, of whom 296 will serve as platoon commanders, 112 as company commander aides; and 100 as artillery, engineering, logistics, and other specialists. About 3,000 cadre have completed political warfare training since 1979; the current class numbers 400 students. The KPNLF leadership claims that most are sent into the interior to conduct intelligence operations and proselytize among villagers and PRK officials. Para-medical training began in April 1981; 52 students have graduated and 82 are currently in training. In addition, guerrilla warfare training reportedly has been underway for some time in the KPNLF southern zone and was recently begun at KPNLF headquarters at Ban Sa Ngae.

The KPNLF has established an intelligence apparatus which could strengthen its military capability somewhat, but thus far it has not made full use of the apparatus in military operations. The rudimentary apparatus is capable of producing intelligence based on reports from refugees, travellers, and other sources. The KPNLF enjoys the sympathy of a portion of the general populace, which provides food and shelter, but sketchy reporting makes it difficult to determine conclusively the extent of popular support. Sympathy may be somewhat stronger in urban areas, and limited reporting indicates the KPNLF may have the sympathy and perhaps support of some PRK officials and bureaucrats.

To a large extent, KPNLF military activities continue to be almost totally defensive and focused on survival in its camps along the Thai-Kampuchea border, particularly in the Ban Sa Ngae headquarters region, where conventional warfare theories prevail. Sabotage and hit-and-run tactics have been occasionally directed toward Vietnamese installations and patrols. In recent months KPNLF forces have begun conducting limited patrols and reportedly have fought well in a few skirmishes with the Vietnamese. KPNLF soldiers in the southern zone, where guerrilla warfare techniques are followed, have become militarily the most active. The KPNLF may have worked out accommodations with a few local PRK military units. For the most part, they now avoid internecine clashes with other groups along the Thai-Kampuchean border. Although skirmishes have recently occurred with DK forces, the two sides occasionally cooperate against the Vietnamese along the border and in the interior.

Conclusions and Prospects

In many respects the KPNLF has made some progress in its efforts to organize and develop its military forces. Improvements have been made especially in organization, training and cohesion,

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but so far these improvements have not been translated into much activity on the battlefield. The KPNLF probably enjoys a measure of sympathy and material support among the general populace in parts of the country and may also have the sympathy of some officials in the PRK government and administrative apparatus. A possible measure of KPNLF success is reflected in the extensive PRK propaganda campaign to discredit the KPNLF and in PRK efforts to track down and arrest KPNLF collaborators and informers. On the negative side, KPNLF forces have yet to demonstrate conclusively their mettle on the battlefield and continue to have minimal impact on the military situation. There are questions about the extent to which various armed groups have been integrated into the KPNLF structure. Lack of experience in guerrilla warfare is a serious problem among soldiers in most KPNLF areas except those in the southern zone.

Shortages of military and food supplies remain a seriously inhibiting factor in KPNLF attempts to expand its military activities, effectiveness and popular support. There is no guarantee, however, that additional supplies would have a major effect on KPNLF military prospects, particularly without an increase in training and combat experience.

Additional military equipment and supplies probably would allow the KPNLF to expand its military and civilian ranks somewhat along the border, but significant growth in the interior could be inhibited by a fear of reprisals, a perception of the KPNLF as a front for the DK or an unwillingness to give up the relative comfort and security of village or city life. Undynamic leadership is also likely to be a problem. With few exceptions, KPNLF leaders thus far have not demonstrated the charisma, the experience in guerrilla warfare, and other qualities needed to weld an effective fighting force. The recent arrival in KPNLF zones of several exiled senior Republican military officers, however, could ameliorate the leadership problem somewhat.

Vietnamese, Chinese and DK attitudes and actions toward a militarily (and politically) strong KPNLF also play a decisive role. The KPNLF camp at Ban Sa Ngae is highly vulnerable and could be scattered by Vietnamese or DK artillery barrages. KPNLF passivity probably helps the Vietnamese mood of restraint. Vietnamese forces probably could easily destroy KPNLF conventional military forces, should they be seen as too threatening, although KPNLF guerrilla trained units would probably survive. DK forces may also be capable of overwhelming the much weaker KPNLF military, but China might serve as a brake on any such attempt. In sum, although the KPNLF has some organizational capacity and base of strength among the Kampuchean people, under present circumstances, its effectiveness is still limited. It remains an open question whether the KPNLF can develop over time into a strong and effective resistance force.

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